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Phebe R. *Jacobsen*, 78, aided Haley in `Roots' research

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SUN STAFF

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Phebe R. *Jacobsen*, the Maryland archivist who helped author Alex Haley trace his ancestors, leading to his Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Roots" and the acclaimed television miniseries "Roots: The Saga of An American Family," died Wednesday from complications of diabetes at her Annapolis home. She was 78.

Mrs. *Jacobsen's* connection to the story began one day in 1967, when Mr. Haley, carrying a suitcase crammed with family records and photographs, entered the Maryland Hall of Records. There to meet him was Mrs. *Jacobsen*, who was on duty that morning.

He was seeking information on Kunta Kinte, an ancestor who had been kidnapped by slave traders in Gambia, West Africa, in 1767, and sent to Annapolis where he was led ashore in chains at the City Dock.

With all of the acumen, diligence and persistence of a seasoned detective, Mrs. *Jacobsen* plunged into the archives' vast records and eventually produced a handwritten port ledger listing all vessels that called at Annapolis during the fall of 1767.

There, in the next-to-last entry, was a notation for the Lord Ligonier, the only ship from the River Gambia, Africa, whose manifest listed in addition to beeswax, cotton and "elephants' teeth," a human cargo of "98 Negroes" who were described as a "cargo of choice, healthy slaves."

"I remember like it was yesterday," Mrs. *Jacobsen* said last year, as she recalled the moment of discovery in an interview with The Sun.

"He just went through the roof. He said something like, `This puts it all together. The circle is rounded.' He knew from his

grandparents that 'Naplis' was the name of the port where his ancestor came. This would have been proof that his ancestor was here. I remember the Times of London called later and said, 'Are you sure he found it?' because they didn't believe it. I said, 'Look, I saw it.' "

The excitement of the moment quickly blossomed into a lasting and rich friendship defined by more than a quarter-century of correspondence, personal visits and shared meals that ended with Mr. Haley's death in 1992.

In a 1975 letter to Mrs. *Jacobsen*, he wrote: "I will never forget long as I live how one morning Phebe lifted up a little 3 X 5 index card bearing the ship name 'Lord Ligonier.' I will never forget the look on your face when you saw the look on mine. Loved you ever since."

Last year, when Anne Arundel County and state officials unveiled a bronze statue at City Dock honoring Alex Haley, Mrs. *Jacobsen* told The Sun, "He was very special. I don't think you'll find another person like Alex for years to come."

Until her retirement in 1990, Mrs. *Jacobsen* was a familiar figure for more than three decades in the Hall of Records to those doing historical or personal research. Earlier, she had worked for Historic Annapolis and the Pennsylvania State Archives.

She managed to combine a lifelong interest in history and genealogy with a refined patience required to index historical records.

"She was the unsung hero of the 'Roots' saga," Leonard Blackshear, chairman of the Kunta Kinte-Alex Haley Memorial Foundation in Annapolis and a longtime friend, said Friday.

"She was the one who made the final connection which allowed that story to surge forth. She helped trigger it and also made Alex the father of the popular genealogy movement."

Mr. Blackshear added, "Her life was a celebration of strength and diversity. The ripples from Phebe's life will continue to wash over our community, state and nation's history."

Quiet, determined and soft-spoken, Mrs. *Jacobsen* could become "quite animated when she had a point to make," said Mr. Blackshear, laughing.

Chris Haley, the author's nephew and the associate director of reference services at the Hall of Records since 1993, described

Mrs. **Jacobsen** as an "inspiration."

"She was able to put herself back into a period, and it was almost like she knew the people that she was researching personally even though they lived 200 or 300 years ago," Chris Haley said. "It was amazing. She could bring the past alive."

Mrs. **Jacobsen**, a caring and thoughtful archivist, would gently suggest to researchers that they examine and study the often-overlooked birth, marriage and church records, which contain rare and vital genealogical leads.

"She also stressed that they check into laws which defined a community and let them know what was going on at the time. She never didn't want to help someone," Mr. Haley said.

Nancy M. Bramucci, curator of special collections at the Hall of Records, marveled at Mrs. **Jacobsen's** personal touch with researchers.

"She'd ask them, 'What records are you using?' and then would suggest others. 'How's it coming? How about looking here?' she'd ask. She always took a deep personal interest in their work," she said.

Even though retired, Mrs. **Jacobsen** continued to conduct genealogical studies and research into Maryland's Native Americans from her book-crammed brick home on Glenwood Street near the Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium.

Born Phebe Robinson in Baltimore, she was raised in Washington, D.C., and Westminster, where she graduated from high school. She earned a bachelor's degree from Western Maryland College.

She was married in 1943 to Bryce **Jacobsen**, a farmer, carpenter and tutor, who died in 1998.

Services are private.

She is survived by a son, Eric G. **Jacobsen** of Riva; a daughter, Kristin J. Onyeme of London, England; a sister, Joan R. Holman of New Bloomfield, Pa.; five grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Sun staff writer Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan contributed to this article.

Obituaries

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obituaries, The Sun regrets that it cannot publish all the obituaries it receives. Because The Sun regards obituaries as news, we give preference to those submitted within 48 hours of a person's death. It is also our intention to run obituaries no later than seven days after death.

Phebe R. *Jacobsen*, a longtime Maryland archivist, was described as the "unsung hero of the `Roots' saga."

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